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Southern Illinois  
University  
at Edwardsville

# SEXUAL ABUSE OF CHILDREN



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RAPE & SEXUAL ABUSE  
CARE CENTER

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# WHAT IS CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE?

Child sexual abuse is the use of a child for the sexual gratification of another person by:

- fondling, petting or sexually touching a child
- having a child perform a sexual act
- penetrating a child's vagina, mouth or anus
- allowing a child to watch a sexual act
- watching a child bathe or undress

# WHO CAN BE SEXUALLY ABUSED?

Sexual abuse may occur in families from all racial, social, economic, educational, and religious backgrounds. All members of the family are affected, and may need help dealing with their feelings.

# HOW OFTEN DOES SEXUAL ABUSE OCCUR?

Most sexual abuse is not reported. We do know that one out of every four females and one out of every seven males may be abused by the time they are eighteen. And, we know that the younger the child is, the more likely it is that the offender is someone the child knows.

# WHAT IS INCEST?

If a child is molested by a member of the immediate family, it is called INCEST.

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# When Is Incest Most Likely to Occur?

While the factors which cause incest are difficult to identify, there are some characteristics that are often found in incestuous families. These include: 1) **Isolation**: often members of an incestuous family depend upon one another to satisfy all their emotional needs; 2) **Marital difficulties**: male partners may withdraw from spouses and turn to a vulnerable child instead of seeking to resolve their difficulties with the other adult; 3) **Role reversal**: in many cases the child may be forced to fulfill adult roles such as parent or housekeeper while parents become dependent upon the child to meet their needs.

## Where Does Incest Most Commonly Occur?

Incest occurs in the city, in the country, in the East, and in the West. Most episodes happen in the child's own home. The home of the offender is the next most likely place for abuse to occur.

## WHY DOES SEXUAL ABUSE HAPPEN?

An offender who is unable to deal with relationships may turn to children to satisfy basic needs. These needs may include support and nurturing, as well as sexual fulfillment. Other offenders find children to be sexually stimulating, and may never engage in adult relationships. Some adults believe children should be taught about sex through demonstration. Some adults view children as property and believe they have the right to use children in this manner.



# HOW CAN YOU TELL IF A CHILD IS BEING SEXUALLY ABUSED?

There are some indicators that help determine whether a child has experienced an abusive situation. You might suspect there is a problem if: the child has an unusual interest in sex; the child has sexual knowledge beyond his/her age; there is an abrupt change in behavior or personality; the child seems angry at everyone but won't say why; the child has few friends; the child complains of frequent stomachaches or experiences nightmares. If several indicators are present, an investigation should be initiated.

## WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF SEXUAL ABUSE?

A child can suffer emotional or physical harm from sexual abuse and incest, whether it occurs only once or over a period of several years. Some of the effects may include damage to emotional health, physical well-being, or social functioning.

### Emotional Health

Children become confused when the person they have been taught to trust and depend upon treats them in a way that is frightening or painful. Many children lose their ability to **trust**. Feelings of **guilt** are also very common, as the children often believe that something they did was responsible for their being treated in this manner. **Self-esteem** often suffers, as children come to regard themselves as worthless, different, or socially unacceptable.

## Physical Health

Some children begin taking out their fear and anger upon themselves. They may think about **suicide**, hurt themselves intentionally, or begin using **drugs or alcohol**. For girls who have entered puberty, **pregnancy** is also a very real concern.

## Social Functioning

When children have had sexual experiences beyond those of their friends, they may see themselves as different. They sometimes begin to isolate themselves or have difficulty relating to age-mates who have not had the same experiences. Some children, because of their inability to trust, have problems establishing intimate relationships with others. They may feel an inability to love or be loved.

## WILL MY CHILD BECOME A SEXUAL ABUSER?

Statistics show that many children who are victims of child sexual abuse may become sexual abusers themselves. The anger, fear, confusion, guilt and sense of powerlessness they feel as victims often lead them to abuse others, thus creating a “**cycle of violence**.” Involving the child as soon as possible in counseling helps the child to resolve those uncomfortable feelings and lessens the chances of the child victimizing another.

## WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF YOU SUSPECT SEXUAL ABUSE OR INCEST?

For the sake of everyone involved, the best thing to do is to report your suspicions to the authorities. A report is not an accusation; it is simply telling someone that you think there may be a problem. The Child Abuse Hotline is a toll-free number that has been set up solely for this purpose. The hotline number is:

**1-800-252-2873**. You may report anonymously. If you feel the child is in immediate danger, however, call the local police department.



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**FOR MORE INFORMATION,  
CONTACT:**

**The Rape and Sexual Abuse Care Center  
Box 1154**

**Southern Illinois University  
at Edwardsville**

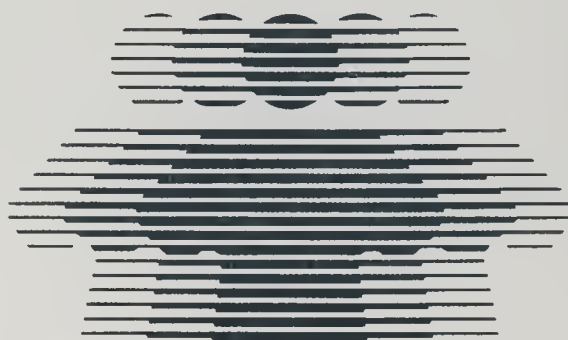
**Edwardsville, Illinois 62026-1154  
(618) 692-2197**

**OFFICE HOURS:**

**(8:00 a.m.-4:30 p.m.)**

**Monday-Friday**

**HOTLINE — 24 HOURS**



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